

SALEM OREGON STATESMAN
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CIA shouldn't employ journalists

CIA Director Stansfield Turner insists that, if a suitable occasion presents itself, he will authorize use of American journalists overseas as CIA agents. He is wrong.

This practice, eliminated by George Bush when he was CIA director, should not have been revived.

Turner had a full-scale argument with U.S. newspaper editors on this issue in Washington, D.C., last week. Neither side came away convinced.

Turner argued that a journalist, in supplying information to CIA, does not need to slant the news he or she writes. He contends that a journalist has the same patriotic obligation as any other citizen to assist his country when the CIA decides he is in a position to provide useful intelligence about another country.

TURNER IS OPERATING WITH pre-Watergate reasoning. It isn't enough to be "clean" these days. In this suspicious age, it is essential to sustain the appearance of being clean.

This means that American foreign correspondents, if they are to be convincing in sending back impartial news accounts to the American readership, must not only be unbiased, but be seen as being unbiased.

They can't escape a tainted image if the CIA, even under limited and exceptional circumstances, may be using some of them as agents. Potential news sources will wonder, as they offer background and assistance, "Is this information going to the CIA?"

While in a very few specific instances, correspondents may be able to assist the United States by working with the CIA, in a great number of instances, American readers may be deprived of useful information because sources will stay silent.

SO, WHICH IS THE MORE patriotic course, to stand firm behind both the reality and the appearance of maintaining unbiased news, or of accepting the possibility that the CIA may be recruiting journalists?

Turner asked the editors to bring understanding minds to his problems of restoring a balance between the need to monitor CIA activities and the need to keep the CIA secret enough to fulfill its intelligence mission.

We would agree that the pendulum needs to be kept in the middle of its stroke.

At present, in the post-Watergate climate, the CIA must clear any covert action overseas with up to eight Congressional committees. Turner is seeking to reduce this to two, with the understanding that those two committees contain Congressmen who are also members of the other six committees to which the CIA now reports.

IN ADDITION, THE NATIONAL Security Council now keeps a close supervision over all CIA activities, and the president himself must approve covert action (the attempt to influence action in other countries without the source of that influence becoming known.)

The more people in Congress or elsewhere who have access to information about covert activity, the more difficult it is to get people overseas to enter into it, Turner contends.

He also wants to limit public access to certain secret files. At present, he must go to court to ask that these files, and the names therein, be kept secret. He has had no trouble getting court agreement. But, he contends, the CIA can't enlist agents overseas when there is a risk their names may be made public if a judge doesn't agree with the CIA interpretation of need.

WHAT TURNER IS SAYING, repeatedly, is that, in today's suspicious world, his agency not only needs to protect its sources, it must be seen by others as having that ability.

If Turner so clearly sees this for his own agency, it is surprising he doesn't see the same thing for the American newsgathering system.